New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Collector's Item"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 9, 1952

'Collector's Item' Opens at the Booth

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Collector's Item" may not provoke anyone to much laughter or enjoyment, but it makes you curious about what goes on in the minds of people who invest in plays.

After listening to this one, it seems impossible that it could have looked like a good bet on paper. It is contrived without being imaginative, talkative without being diverting, and brash without being witty.

There are several story lines that get in each other's way without ever really taking much shape. The principal one is twisted by a miracle of rhetoric into a high sounding patriotic thesis. You will not believe that this particular plot starts with the installation of an outhouse seat in a genuine sedan chair of Madame Pompadour.

Enter, a Genius.

A politically ambitious snob in Washington society is ruined by this ingenious substitution.

The play concerns a family of art dealers. The mother is Turkish, the father Egyptian, and the three sons Dutch, French and English, by land of birth.

Into their midst comes a genius who can make imitations of valuable antiques, which are more satisfactory than the real thing.

Falls in Love.

The brothers trick him into working for them, but he falls in love with the Dutchman's girl. When the sedan chair he has reconditioned seems to have disgraced them all, it develops that the article has become so famous, galleries all over the country are bidding for it.

It must be quite clear what type of humor is derived from this situation. Oddly enough, the dialogue is less embarrassing as is, than it would have been if it succeeded in being funnier. Now, nobody has to laugh very often, so there is no frequent inclination to hide your head.

Allyn Joslyn is easily the most professional performer in the troupe. With little to do, he occasionally gives the play a pounce of energy by looking as if his nerves were frazzled, and leaning backwards when he walks to suggest speed.

A Good Idea.

James Gregory plays the restoring genius with a minimum of effort or antics, which is a good idea. Gaye Jordan is a very handsome, posy heroine, and Louis Sorin is amiable as the Egyptian father who loves to cook.

The rest of the cast steps in and out of the picture as the scattered lines demand, without any particular attempt to sustain what is not there anyway.

"COLLECTOR'S ITEM"

Play by Lillian Day and Alfred Golden; staged by Mr. Golden and Mr. Clark; presented by Roger Clark in association with Lloyd Isler at the Booth Theatre, February 8, 1952. The cast:

Helen McCarthy.....Florida Friebus
Nick Galvani.....Don Grusso
Adrian Van Dyck...Allyn Joslyn
Yousuff Birka.....Louis Sorin
Lydia Robert.....Gaye Jordan
Mrs. Roger Blain.....Pamela Roberts
Doree Bennett...Jane Middleton
Lucien Dulac.....Rene Paul
Sir Cecil Pond.....Erik Rhodes
Fatima Birka....Adelaide Klein
U. S. Customs' Examiner...Mac McLeod
Glenway Trent...James Gregory
Mr. Hochheimer..Mitchell Kowal
Mr. Blanc.....Harold Grau
Photographer.....Ralph Hertz
Bobbysoxer.....Judy Hall
Mr. Bailey...Fred Irving Lewis

Journal New York American

February 9, 1952

A Play That Shouldn't Have Even Opened

By JOHN McCLAIN

People who have some interest in the theatre are always saying to people like me, who are supposed to be very knowledgeable, and aren't:

"Why is it," they say, "that every now and then a show opens on Broadway that doesn't have a ghost of a chance? Why isn't somebody smart enough to see what's going to happen and stop it before it comes to town?"

I never had an answer, and I still haven't—especially after last night's opening of "Collector's Item" at the Booth Theatre.

Roger Clark produced this effort from the pens of Lillian Day and Alfred Golden in association with Lloyd Isler. I don't know any of these people but I have no reason to believe they are anything but nice, law-abiding citizens.

I do happen to know some of the persons in the cast and I know they are decent and amiable and interested primarily in the common ambition of self-preservation. I don't know the backers, or angels, but I assume they are simply some other pleasant people with money who would like to make more money.

Why or how they all got together under the banner of "Collector's Item" and persevered to the extent of bringing it to Broadway is entirely beyond me.

The sagging structure which provides the background for the evening concerns an antique dealer, Allyn Joslyn, who sees as his one chance for solvency the sale of a beat-up sedan chair to a Washington hostess.

To have it properly restored he must secure the services of James Gregory, a strange young artisan who is determined to go to Mexico. To keep him in New York to complete the job, Joslyn persuades his best girl, Gaye Jordan, to precipitate a love affair. You guessed it! They really fall in love.

• • •

All this is cluttered up with an incredible family and one of the most cumbersome plots outside of soap opera. In the final stanza they even degenerate to the extent of introducing Chic Sale into the proceedings.

I have only sympathy for Allyn Joslyn, James Gregory, Gaye Jordan, Erik Rhodes, Rene Paul and the other entirely competent performers who found themselves in the surroundings. After all, these people must eat and pay rent and they can hardly be condemned for accepting a weekly salary.

And I certainly have nothing against the producers, authors, or angels. Obviously all of them would have preferred to be associated with a big success; they are not public enemies.

But I am amazed they didn't realise they were backing a loser long hence.

The New York Times

February 9, 1952

'Collector's Item,' Comedy of the Antique Business, Opens at the Booth Theatre

By BROOKS ATKINSON

"Collector's Item," which opened at the Booth last evening, has only one basic fault. It is monumentally dull. By working together feverishly and unsparingly, the author and actors have created an evening of boredom. This is not as easy as you might imagine. For Lillian Day and Alfred Golden have written a number of jokes about a lovable family of international rogues who deal in antiques; and a large cast, headed by Allyn Joslyn, cracks jokes, rushes around the stage, shouting and wailing, until curtain time. It is hard to be dull when so much talent works so industriously.

* * *

There is ample precedent for assuming that a crazy family is adorable, at least in the theatre. "You Can't Take It With You" established that law of playwriting. Rummaging around among the gilded hock-shops, Miss Day and Mr. Golden have found three brothers who deal in rare furniture, live on post-dated checks, quarrel and love each other. They have a dear old father who dotes on Arabian cooking and a dear old mother who reads fortunes and maintains an other-worldly detachment amid the bedlam and swindle of her sons' business.

The authors have an alarming confidence in make-believe. They happily skip from one insanity to another as if they were sure that they are compounding hilarity. During the middle of the evening they devote themselves to developing a sane and noble modern Leonardo da Vinci who knows everything about music, poetry, painting, wood-working, metal-working and dames; and who also despises money.

How this character transforms an old French sedan chair into an out-house and wrecks the political career of a Washington impostor is more than this column can describe lucidly. At any rate, you can be sure that everything turns out well with a maximum of high spirits and a minimum of humor.

* * *

No matter how tiresome a play may be, a lot of people have to work very extravagantly to produce it. "Collector's Item" requires an ornate setting and imposing antiques imported from London. Mr. Golden and Roger Clark have directed the performance on the theory that everyone must keep moving and shouting.

Allyn Joslyn, who played a brilliant drama critic the last time he was on Broadway, is now playing a highly cultivated bunco-man. It is to be hoped that the sequence is accidental. Mr. Joslyn plays the part in a mood of droll excitement; and Gaye Jordan, Florida Friebus, Erik Rhodes, Louis Sorin and the others are earning their salaries honestly.

In addition to fashionably attired first-nighters, representing the brains of New York society, the audience included highly-paid agents for M.-G.-M. and Paramount and professional theatregoers in search of talent and solace. Still, "Collector's Item" is duller than most dull plays.

Daily Mirror

February 9, 1952

'Collector's Item' Isn't Worth Looking At

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Roger Clark and Lloyd Isler brought a frantic farce called "Collector's Item" to the Booth Theatre last evening. It's the handiwork of Lillian Day and Alfred Golden. Now, a collector's item is something to cherish, but here is one we shouldn't care to sample more than once. On second thought, even once is too much.

The new arrival has to do with a family of antique dealers, the most successful of whom is Adrian Van Dyck, son of Yousuff Birka, an Arab, and Fatima Birka, a Turk. His brothers in the business are Lucien Dulac, of Paris, and Sir Cecil Pond, of London. Like chameleons, the Birka boys have the ability to assume the coloration of their surroundings.

The American Adrian uses his girl friend to fascinate an independent and impecunious young genius into restoring an historic sedan chair for sale to a wealthy Washington hostess of dubious loyalties. The plan backfires when the girl elopes with the artist, after they've played a dirty trick on the gauche socialite. The ensuing publicity, however, saves the Birka fortunes.

"Collector's Item" boasts satiric potentialities which collaborators Day and Golden have failed to capitalize upon. Their plotting is obvious, and their humor flat. It's like a bottle of wine with a promising label, that fails to pop its cork and sparkle when poured.

Co-producer Clark and co-author Golden directed. Their staging, regrettably, has not enhanced the flavor of the script. They have left a lot of capable actors in the lurch.

Allyn Joslyn, brought back from Hollywood to impersonate the scheming Van Dyck, seems ill at ease in the role. The usually reliable Erik Rhodes, Louis Sorin, Rene Paul, Adelaide Klein, Jane Middleton, Don Grusso and Florida Friebus also find the going difficult.

James Gregory one of our better and more versatile young actors, fares best.

Gaye Jordan, relatively inexperienced, makes the most of her opportunities, as the girl Van Dyck employs to trick the artist, only to lose her to him. She displays Michi Weglyn's smart costumes to advantage.

"Collector's Item" is one of those well-meaning innocuous little stereotypes that adds nothing to a season desperately in need of something of distinction.

DAILY NEWS

February 9, 1952

'Collector's Item' a Period Piece; Should Be Here for Short Period

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In the play reviewing business, which is my occupation, a writer should take care with all his words but most particularly with his adjectives, lest a careless adjective come back to haunt him in the advertisements. He should be particularly wary of throwing superlatives around, because if he uses them all up before a season ends he is stuck without any ammunition for the rest of the period. Therefore I shall not say that "Collector's Item," which opened last evening at the Booth Theatre, is the worst play of the season. How can I tell, with three and a half months to go and heavens-to-Betsy knows what lies in store for us? Exercising advisable moderation, I should only report that "Collector's Item" is the most dispiriting comedy since June 1, 1951.

The authors, Lillian Day and Alfred Golden, have tried to assemble something funny and farcical about the antique business. For instance, last evening I heard some actor say that somebody had a few wrought irons in the fire. The plot is made from as many bits and pieces as a buhl cabinet, all of which have become unglued—art dealers like the Duveen brothers, a magazine writer (female), a modern textile designer (also female), a Washington hostess (unseen, thank Allah), two refugees from "Abie's Irish Rose" celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary, a U. S. Customs examiner who gets onstage and vanishes into thin air, a representative of the State Department—and, for a hero, an unimaginative present-day Cellini who thinks that the art and antique racket is a lot of bushwah.

There were 17 members of the cast last night and 15 of them looked, acted and probably were desperate. Possibly the most uneasy of all was Allyn Joslyn, because he was starred as an antique dealer. Gaye Jordan and James Gregory carrying the love interest—there I go again, squandering words; strike out "interest"—seemed fairly normal and quite attractive.

"Collector's Item" is attractively and colorfully mounted in an antique-shop setting supervised, the program says, by Charles Elson.

New York Post

February 10, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

An Evening Among the Antiques

The worst play of the season opened at the Booth Theater Friday evening, and this bulletin supersedes any reports to the same effect I may have issued previously concerning other Broadway exhibits. It is called "Collector's Item," it is the work of two unfortunate dramatists named Lillian Day and Alfred Golden, and I can pay it the dubious compliment of saying that, for tastelessness, humorlessness, witlessness, and general feebleness of idea and story-telling it easily outdistances all of its possible rivals.

The theater, I am told, can be educational, and I suppose that, if you listen attentively enough and can keep awake, "Collector's Item" could increase your knowledge of the business of buying and selling antiques. There is even a joke that ends with "It's a Renoir, not a Rembrandt," which struck me as being cultured. Chiefly, however, what I, for one, learned from this luckless little gem is that, of all the shoptalk in the world, that dealing with the merchandizing of objects of art can certainly be the most uninteresting.

Three Brothers

Considering what a mild play "Collector's Item" is, it contains quite a lot of plot, and I must admit shamefacedly that I couldn't understand all of it. I know that it takes place in the Van Dyck Galleries in the East Sixties, New York," and it deals with three brothers who are in the antique business. One of them is an American, another is French, and the third is English, and their mother and father, who are about to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary, are Egyptians. To this point, I could follow it readily.

I am also aware that it has to do with a roving young philosopher, who has a genius for making things that are taken for genuine antiques, and who is compared by one of the play's erudite characters to Leonardo da Vinci. He wants to go off to Mexico, but the brothers scheme to keep him in New York so he can repair, as only he can, a sedan chair that belonged to Louis XV. I am sorry to say that I also understand that, as what the authors proudly regard as the cream of their jest, the sedan chair turns out to be actually a toilet.

The Puzzle

What puzzles me is that this valuable antique somehow brings the State Department into the play. It seems that it was to be purchased by a woman named Dolly Madison Woodward, and, when the story gets into the newspapers that the sedan chair was really something else, there is so much national laughter that Mrs. Woodward is exposed as a menace to America. Since the lady never appears and it is never made clear what skulduggery she is up to, I couldn't find out what the peril was, and, to tell you the truth, I don't really care.

A number of well-known and hitherto blameless actors are concerned with the proceedings, including Allyn Joslyn, who once played a drama critic in "Arsenic and Old Lace." For a few minutes, I hoped that James Gregory, as the modern Leonardo, was going to brighten things a bit, but he, too, got bogged down in the general inanity. At least, I can say for "Collector's Item" that, in a way, it is well-named. It is most certainly a collector's item for those morbid first-nighters who collect the memory of inept plays.

New York Herald Tribune

February 9, 1952

'Collector's Item'

By **WALTER F. KERR**

"Collector's Item," which opened at the Booth last night, takes place in the Van Dyck Galleries in New York City. A number of genuine antiques are displayed on the stage, and a good many more in the dialogue. If I counted correctly there were at least four jocular variations on the term "derriere," and the always reliable "pot de chambre" provided not only the basis for several incidental jokes but the plot structure for the entire third act.

When authors Lillian Day and Alfred Golden are not giving us the straight comic cliche, they are busy with tricky twists on the cliche, regaling us with lines like "I'll believe it when I hear it in black and white," "Rome wasn't burnt in a day," and "A verbal contract isn't worth the paper it's written on."

They have, too, still another device, one which I have not yet been able to classify. At a climactic point in the action Allyn Joslyn is required to collapse on a sofa and exclaim "My name is mud—a four-letter word," and the despair which he brought to the moment seemed to me not entirely feigned.

* * * *

The heavy-handed and thoroughly witless farce in which Mr. Joslyn and a number of otherwise agreeable performers are trapped has to do with three brothers who operate antique shops in New York, London and Paris. They have assembled at the moment for their parents' golden wedding anniversary and to bring off the sale of a sedan chair which once belonged to Madame Pompadour.

The chair, it develops, has been shattered in transit and the family is faced with bankruptcy. Into the gallery walks the one man in New York who can restore it, but he is a free soul who cannot be hired for anything so mundane as money and he is about to depart for an esthetic sojourn in Mexico. To persuade him to stay and rescue their investment, the brothers throw an attractive young interior decorator at him. He stays. As it has a habit of doing, true love blossoms. The girl, now conscience-stricken for having led him on, exclaims, in the authors' characteristic prose, "What would you say if I should tell you I'm not really the kind of girl you think I am?"

* * *

At about this time, social consciousness enters the picture. The chair is intended for a prominent Washington hostess who, it is hinted, is a profound menace to our national security. This matter was never made quite clear to me, but I pass it on for what it is worth. To square the girl's conscience, the chamber pot of the first paragraph is inserted into the sedan chair, the Washington hostess is disgraced by unwittingly appearing in it at a fete, and the United States government arrives on scene at the final curtain to congratulate all and sundry for having saved the nation. I tell you.

Allyn Joslyn is a fine farceur, and the fact that you don't hate him at the end of the evening is a real tribute to his charm and ability. James Gregory, as the cultivated young artist, comes closer than any one else to making the material seem plausible, and his romantic passages with Gaye Jordan are engaging enough.

Producer Roger Clark and co-author Alfred Golden directed the play, apparently without consulting one another. The staging is the most frantic, aimless, and altogether undisciplined I have seen this season.

"Charles Dickens"

The New York Times
February 5, 1952

Emlyn Williams Is Acting Six Scenes From the Works of Charles Dickens

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although Charles Dickens fancied himself as an actor, Emlyn Williams is an actor. On account of the capriciousness of human life, it is impossible to prove now that Mr. Williams' readings from Dickens, which opened at the John Golden last evening, are superior to the readings Dickens gave in New York in 1867. None of our present staff members was present on that celebrated occasion.

Mr. Williams is made up like Dickens. He wears Victorian evening dress, with a red geranium in his buttonhole. His long, gray hair is pushed back, and his chin whiskers are immaculately parted—the very model of a vain and successful author associating with the masses. He stands behind a genteel reading desk that is an exact replica of the one Dickens used.

* * *

When Dickens began his public readings in 1853, it is reported that they were much more than readings. He acted the scenes he read; and it is also reported that his audiences laughed and wept in fits of hysteria. No one had hysterics last night. But not because Mr. Williams was not acting with brilliance and magnetism.

As a matter of fact, he was acting in the grand manner. For some of Dickens is written in the grand style with sweeping effects, purple patches and daring imagery. Since Mr. Williams loves Dickens and believes in the scenes he has chosen, he draws living portraits in words, finds the humor or the pathos in the key phrases and gives us a magnificent solo performance. Dickens was a great exhibitionist. But it is doubtful that he was the master of acting that Mr. Williams is in this show.

* * *

Lovers of Dickens will choose their favorite pages from among those Mr. Williams is acting. The program includes scenes from "Our Mutual Friend," "Dombey and Son," "Pickwick Papers," "A Tale of Two Cities" and two selections from "Christmas Stories." Your correspondent found "The Signal Man" rather juvenile and regarded Bob Sawyer's bachelor party a relatively commonplace example of "Pickwick Papers." Chubby, amiable Mr. Pickwick only just steps in and out of it.

But the sketch of pompous and obtuse social life from "Our Mutual Friend" and the bitter panorama torn out of "A Tale of Two Cities" are memorable scenes. The comic abundance of the one, as pungent as a Rowlandson print, and the caustic economy of the other make great pieces of prose writing. Although the scene from "Our Mutual Friend" is prolix, the words have all the extravagance of solemn burlesque. And although Dickens was no scholar or philosopher, the scene from "A Tale of Two Cities" is fiercely dramatic. It reveals the emptiness of high life, the misery of low life and the tocsin sounds a warning through every page.

To one theatregoer these two scenes are the gems of the program. Mr. Williams plays the Podsnap scene with great gusto, managing somehow to act pieces of sculpture and pieces of silver plate as vividly as people. Solid English society of the middle of the nineteenth century looks hilariously hollow by the time he gets through with it.

In the biting scene from "A Tale of Two Cities" Mr. Williams plays without elaboration—convinced and severe in his style. Like the writing, the acting is fluent and dramatic. When Dickens was traipsing around the British Isles and the American east coast with his reading stand, could he get to the heart of a scene so unerringly and swiftly? No one knows, though anyone can guess.

New York Post
February 5, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Happy Evening With Mr. Dickens

Being a rabid and rhapsodic Dickens enthusiast, I may perhaps be slightly prejudiced in my conviction that Emlyn Williams' one-man show as the great novelist reading from his incomparable works, which opened at the John Golden last night, is one of the rich delights of the theatrical season.

But I feel sure that you don't have to be a Dickens addict to revel in the solo performance that Mr. Williams is putting on. As sheer dramatic entertainment, filled with hilarity, eloquence, honest pathos, beauty and brilliant acting, this is an evening that should be a rare pleasure to anyone of taste and intelligence.

Make no mistake about it: the show that Mr. Williams is providing is not a literary affectation for the benefit of a famous novelist's private cult. It is authentic theater, and drama of a high order and almost universal appeal. It is not even correct to call it a "reading," any more than the successful recent presentation of "Don Juan in Hell" was a "reading." The visiting star does have books in front of him, and he does make a pretense of turning the pages from time to time. But he never once has to refer to them, and he acts out every character and every event with the varied brilliance of the superb player he is.

Being Dickens

You must have read what Mr. Williams does. Dressed and made up to resemble Dickens and standing behind a reading desk that is the replica of the one the great man used in his own performances, he presents scenes and episodes from both the novels and the short stories, changing his voice to fit the immortal characters and capturing the mood and spirit with unfailing rightness. It isn't long before the conviction that he really is Dickens becomes almost unconquerable, and, to carry his acting to an even higher degree, it is not only Dickens you are seeing but also the immortal men and women of the author's imagination.

His program is made up in equal parts of the comedy and the drama of the Master. First he gives us two of the wonderful party scenes from "Our Mutual Friend," the one at the home of the upstart Vaneerings and that which the fatuous jingo, Podsnap, gave for his shy daughter. At this point, I must note that I could happily watch Mr. Williams portray Podsnap for an entire evening. Next, he does scenes from "Dombey and Son" up to the death of poor little Paul Dombey, and I can only wish that he could have devoted more time to Paul's delightful friend, Mr. Toots, who happens to be one of my favorite Dickens characters.

Other Episodes

After that, Mr. Williams turns to the great "Pickwick Papers" to do the hilarious episode of the party impecunious Bob Sawyer gave for Mr. Pickwick. This is followed by the eerie tale called "The Signal Man" and the narrative about the hapless circus midget, "Mr. Chops," both of them from the "Christmas Stories." Incidentally, as Dickens impersonating the sympathetic carnival man, who tells the story about luckless Chops, the star gives his finest piece of acting of the evening. Finally, he does sections from "A Tale of Two Cities," including the scene of the killing of the Paris child by the horses of the wicked Marquis.

All of us who are frankly Dickens cultists are bound to be hard and unfair taskmasters, with our own prejudices among the works, and I, who have less enthusiasm for the short stories than for the novels, would have sacrificed at least one of the Christmas tales for, say, more about Pickwick and some of my other particular heroes. But this is the most shameless quibbling, and the program that Mr. Williams has worked out provides a fine indication of the range of one of the greatest and most unforgettable of all writers. If you read Dickens, you mustn't miss this superb solo performance. But even if you don't you will find it a delightful theatrical event.

Daily Mirror

February 5, 1952

Williams Sets New High In Dickens Readings

By ROBERT COLEMAN

For some time, Emlyn Williams has been delighting London with a series of readings from the works of Charles Dickens. Having witnessed the unusual one-man show, S. Hurok arranged to bring it to America. He opened it in Boston on the anniversary of the date in 1867 chosen by Dickens to launch his tour over here.

Last evening New York's Dickens lovers had the opportunity of enjoying the program at the John Golden Theatre. It comprises scenes from "Our Mutual Friend," "Dombey and Son," "Pickwick Papers," "Christmas Stories" and "A Tale of Two Cities." As adapted by Williams, it encompasses humor, drama and eerie suspense.

Made up to look remarkably like Dickens, judging by pictures we have seen of the novelist, Williams stands behind an ornate desk covered in fringed red velvet, with a raised rest for his left arm and a low ledge for a water-glass, white gloves and a nosegay. It is a replica of the apparatus designed by the master himself.

That arm-rest, by the way, becomes quite important during the program. A gifted, versatile actor, Williams uses his voice and features to admirable advantage. And he uses his left hand, emphasized by its height, with equal effect in creating mood, drama and tension. He uses it like a magician. It becomes hypnotic.

The Williams adaptations are devised to give those unfamiliar with the Dickens tomes a background for the characters he introduces. This method succeeds in making each number on the bill seem like a complete playlet, rather than a random excerpt. It is skillful dramaturgy, but, then, Williams is an excellent dramatist as well as a fine actor.

The program has the virtue of being consistently entertaining and absorbing. It is difficult to single out individual items for praise, but the two comprising the last act are terrific. They are "Mr. Chops," the tragi-comic tale of a dwarf with social pretensions, and "The Fancy Ball," a gripping, prophetic account of life in France just prior to the Revolution.

The Williams performance is extraordinary. We have never seen a better solo show in our time. In fact, it sets a new high standard for this type of presentation.

We suspect that it will send many negligent readers back to their libraries for re-readings of the Dickens section. And that it will send many others to local bookstores for a first encounter with the fascinating volumes of the flamboyant Charles.

Dickens was a magnificent satirist. Even after his triumphant reception in America, he could not refrain from flaying his hosts. Williams, as Dickens, is a visitor of a different stamp, amiable and ingratiating, but nonetheless highly effective. He has spent much time over here on our stages, and he is always welcome.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 5, 1952

Dickens Lives Again In Williams' Readings

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Between them, Emlyn Williams and the late Charles Dickens had their audience yelling for more last night, as the British actor completed his collection of scenes from the author's works.

Williams quoted his author once more, in a curtain speech, promising to return with new material next year. His present stuff should serve him well for a lengthy run in the current season.

The program runs a little over two hours and includes two short stories, and excerpts from four novels. It will be impossible to keep Dickens fans away from this program, once they hear of it. Excitingly enough, it has just as much fascination for the uninitiated.

Warm Humor.

Dickens' written world is one in which the senses are all alert. More importantly, though, the awareness of humanity is so sensitive and tingling, that the characters become friends in Mr. Williams' offering.

Above all, always, there is the author's warm, piercing, rudimentary humor, which constantly ignites the instinct of the quick actor.

The program moves on and upward, and it seemed to me the most completely satisfying item is a short story, "Mr. Chops," about a dwarf who wins a lottery ticket. But there is rampant humor and vigor in the "Pickwick" section, and eerie pathos in the "Dombey and Son" quotation.

Touch of Chills.

Anyone who boasts he is above being impressed with stories about the supernatural had better hold his breath as Mr. Williams dreams his special spell with "The Signal Man."

Appropriately he moves toward grandeur, as the program winds up with the thunderous early description of pre-revolutionary France, from "Tale of Two Cities."

The actor has planned his performance with eloquence and detail fine as petit point. At the end you think back over the evening, stunned that he can have found such variety with only one noticeable change of pace or volume. The color here is entirely sprung from character, and the performer's embellishment is as appropriate as leaves are on a tree.

Williams is dressed and made up as Dickens was when he did readings himself from his novels. The actor works from a replica of the writer's desk, which in the end he honors with a bow.

The star wisely begins in a low gear, and you may wonder for the first few minutes how on earth he is going to hold an audience all evening. Shortly, the existence of actor and method are forgotten. The spell takes hold to continue a fabulous fabric of inventive color.

A stammer, a pointed finger, the tipping head or a gesture of smoking are all done so exactly as that particular person must have done it himself, that the theatrical Dickens and the performing Williams are soon as furniture and floor for the live passage of these people.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
February 5, 1952

'Charles Dickens'

By WALTER F. KERR

MR. EMLYN WILLIAMS, who brought his Dickens readings to the Golden Monday night has explained that he first tried them out on his children, then on a group of close friends. He could have made no more fortunate preparation. For there lingers about his performance a wonderful sense of intimacy, of close good fellowship, of simple and warm affection. The family gathering is of the essence of Dickens, and Mr. Williams took us all into the family.

He has not, however, merely settled for the ease and directness of the skilled reader. He is an actor of striking range and great virtuosity as well, and he has brought these virtues to bear on his six selections from the novels. The result is a combination of personal charm and adroit theatrical mimicry which rivets audience attention to him for two solid hours and which, miraculously, becomes increasingly compelling as it goes along.

Mr. Williams presents himself as Charles Dickens, not as a contemporary reader. Decked out with Victorian beard, boutonierre in place in his cutaway, the actor duplicates not only the program which Dickens himself selected for his triumphant American tour, but even the lectern which the novelist designed for himself to permit the maximum use of gesture. Nor is this an idle conceit. The gait at which Mr. Williams first strides onto the stage is that of a popular, but secure and imposing, public idol. The casual flick of the wrist with which he rejects one book and takes up another is the attitude of his author. The satisfied glance he gives at the stage lights as they come up is characterization, not affectation.

Thereafter he sails into passages from "Our Mutual Friend," "Dombey and Son," "Pickwick Papers," "Christmas Stories," and "A Tale of Two Cities" with magnificent gusto. He inflects the expository lines to give them rich, anticipatory color. He characterizes each of the roles in turn: the studied nonchalance of Bob Sawyer's ending every sentence with a suck at his cigar; the zest with which a couple of medical students dive at their dinners, the while they discuss their latest cadavers; the sudden intake of breath of a man speaking into the wind.

He adds revealing gesture. When he speaks of a fashionable lady's purse snapping shut like a pistol, he jumps at the sound. He creates an electrifying moment as a man in a ghost story shudders and looks behind him for an oncoming train. And in the Podsnap episode from "Our Mutual Friend" he even manages elaborate impressions of inanimate objects.

If anything, Mr. Williams is too eager to illustrate, to enlarge. Especially in the first three of his selections, there is a strong tendency never to let well enough alone, never to let Dickens' prose do some of the visual work. By insisting on intoning every sentence for heightened effect, and on acting out everything down to the commas, Mr. Williams gets to gilding the lily, and laboring his comic points. Some of the gesture is terribly literal, too, as when a sheet is drawn back from the face of Dombey's dead son. In the first half of his show, Mr. Williams is long on emphasis, short on suggestion.

With the second half, however, there is a notable increase in slyness, in intimation, in simplicity. "The Signal Man," a ghost story from the Christmas volume, forces him toward more hushed and indirect effects, with a tremendous increase in interior intensity. And in "Mr. Chops"—my own favorite of the evening—he pulls back for a restrained comic characterization which is doubly funny for the delicacy he brings it. The evening concludes with quite a tour de force: the reading of a long narrative passage, nearly without dialogue, from "A Tale of Two Cities," and it is an impressive finale.

To keep the record straight, it must be noted that Mr. Williams' solo readings do not create the heady exhilaration of the Drama Quartette, this season's earlier experiment in declamation. But the evening with Mr. Williams—and Mr. Dickens—has a fascination, and a charm, all its own.

DAILY NEWS
February 5, 1952

Emlyn Williams' Dickens Recital Is a Fascinating One-Man Show

By JOHN CHAPMAN

An extraordinarily professional audience — managers, directors and good actors at liberty, like Lunt and Fontanne —went to the John Golden Theatre last evening for a lesson in show business. This audience took the lesson, liked it and cheered for more.

The teacher was Emlyn Williams, who got himself up in whiskers and costume to look like Charles Dickens, stood behind a curious-looking red plush-covered desk and recited bits and pieces of Dickens. That's all he did—recite; and this was enough to make a heart-warming evening.

Elocution, they used to call this kind of thing when I was a grammar-school urchin with a passionate loathing for all the elocution teachers in all the public schools of Denver. I not only hated the teachers; I hated anybody who was silly ass enough to get up and elocute.

A True One-Man Show.

But I'm very fond of Williams—think he is quite wonderful, as a matter of fact. He doesn't seem to be doing much acting as he tells these stories, for he just stands and pretends to read from a book in an easy manner; but last evening he had his audiences almost hypnotized in its intentness to watch and hear every small detail. His voice seems to have infinite varieties of color and shading, his words are beautifully spoken, his timing is unerring and, even with all those whiskers, his facial expressions make a performance in themselves.

Williams has culled and edited an entertaining assortment of Dickens bits for the six "readings" on his program. They include scenes from "Our Mutual Friend" and "Dombey and Son" as examples of Dickens' humorous but not always good-humored descriptions of fallible and ridiculous mankind. There is a pleasant ghost story about a railway signal man with premonitions of disaster.

The liveliest, perhaps, is the medical students' party from "Pickwick Papers," and the most colorful is a yarn about a circus dwarf who wins a fortune and moves into society. And, for the windup, there is the Fancy Ball episode from "A Tale of Two Cities," a dramatic fragment concerning the beginnings of the French Revolution.

Thank goodness, William does not use a microphone, as did those four elocutionists in "Don Juan in Hell." It would be a bit silly for Charles Dickens himself, supposedly, to step behind a replica of the speaking desk Dickens used on his U. S. tours in the 1850s and 1860s and start breathing down the skinny neck of a mike. People can hear in a theatre if they want to, and last evening they wanted to.